

A few days ago the lives of two Queensland families were ruined. One 12 year old boy stabbed another, who died, in a playground before school started. One was buried over the weekend, and the other was refused bail when he was charged with murder. Both families are devastated. The school is in shock. It was a Catholic school. This has nothing to do with the intimacy of violence.

Fifty years ago a lot of teenage boys carried knives not as weapons but as tools. We all used pocket knives. We used them to sharpen pencils, open tins and carve initials into desk tops, but they were a status object, too. They didn't get used in school fights, because disputes were sorted with fists, and using a knife was not only not 'manly', but a boy's own mates would get stuck into him for being a coward, if he pulled one.

Boys of the early 60s were far more likely to be scared of authority (headmasters with canes, local police with boots and a lavish discretion on how to use them and dads with fists). Most groups of boys looked down on "crooks" (and only a crim would use a knife or at least a 'real' one). But twenty years ago, there **was** a lot of violence among the schoolkids that my daughter mixed with, only we weren't aware of it: the media weren't running the issue, and parents weren't being alerted to it.

Why do schoolchildren use knives? As one year 12 student remarked online to the Herald Sun (17th February), "in most schools kids don't bring knives or weapons to be seen as cool, but to scare off bullies. Lots of bullying goes on where one smartass in a pack of mates wants to make everyone laugh," and this group bullying, he said, wasn't picked up and managed by teachers. Kids don't do their private jockeying for position under adult supervision: research into playground behaviours and language among boys shows that the 'culture' of childhood hasn't changed much in 50 years: boys still work at their pecking order in the mob, pick cliques, and pitilessly dump on outsiders. It's a tough boys' world and no amount of equality rhetoric makes any difference to the time-honoured put-downs and rambunctious activities that come with hierarchical challenges that have been part of western, masculine society since we started noticing it.

Violence among children isn't new. Armed violence isn't either. On 14th September last year, in Victoria, the Age ran police statistics documenting a 45% jump in (admittedly small numbers of) children aged 10-14 who were using knives during criminal behaviour: 20% of their victims were under 10. More of the older children and of adults were carrying knives in public. The government obediently provided greater search powers for police. A Deputy Police Commissioner said that many young people were carrying knives 'for protection', not realising that this increased the risk of a confrontation – they should, he said, "just walk away. "

Peer relations are an important part of children's development and a lot of academic time has been taken up in writing about it. Conflict resolution is an essential element of peer relations– indeed; it's the essential role of civil society. Without prejudging the facts in this particular case, let us assume that a knife was used to 'resolve' a conflict, the feelings caused by the behaviour of one or both towards the other that was designed to influence the other's behaviour, which in turn was prompted by each having different and incompatible goals. Where this happens among adults, be a range of approaches are available, short of violence, from avoidance ("just walk away") to distraction ("there's the bell"); expressions of anger, or seeking social support, and (desirably) compromise if not capitulation.

It takes hard-earned maturity, or an enforced separation, and the presence or imminence of an external authority for either boy to "walk away," when every cell of their psyche is demanding an explosive alternative. Even a man like my late father, the gentlest of men, experiences the un-blooded boy's rush of rage, swelling of humiliation, or surge of fear, and even such as my Dad may

lash out (he laid on with a cricket bat, which knocked the other boy unconscious) and, please God, not kill, but learn never, and how not, to lose control.

Whatever happened between these two tragic children, a boy's play is preparation for the man's life. Adolescence is a time of violent, primitive emotions, of play-acting but also the most intensely lived reality, and confrontations adults rarely see because it is played out in the privacy of childhood space. Boys' passionate assertion of relative worth and pecking order is developmentally necessary. That child's place in the society of his peers is, for that moment, a matter of life and death.

So let it be with the outcome. We have to be gentle with children whose judgment is not yet developed, whose experience of life is limited, who are learning. Like them, we must not rush to judgment on the life of the man to be who is, today, a boy in a Brisbane jail.

Source: <http://moirarayner.com>